

Review: Shouting Through Porcelain & Barbed Wire at Ruiz-Healy Art, San Antonio

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OCTOBER 19, 2026

What happens when traditionally feminine craft becomes a means of questioning borders, identity, and systems of power? In *Our Hands*, a two-person exhibition at Ruiz-Healy Art in San Antonio, brings together Jennifer Ling Datchuk and Consuelo Jimenez Underwood to explore that question.

At first glance, Datchuk's ceramics and Underwood's textile-based works seem to occupy separate artistic and cultural spheres. However, *In Our Hands* demonstrates how both artists employ craft traditions often associated with women's labor to address migration, cultural memory, labor, and identity. The exhibition also creates a conversation between two distinct cultural perspectives. Drawing from Chinese American and Chicana/Indigenous histories, respectively, Datchuk and Underwood use culturally rooted craft practices to examine belonging, citizenship, and the complexities of identity in the contemporary United States. The exhibition is part of *Handwork: Celebrating American Craft 2026*, a nationwide initiative highlighting the diversity and continued relevance of craft across the country.

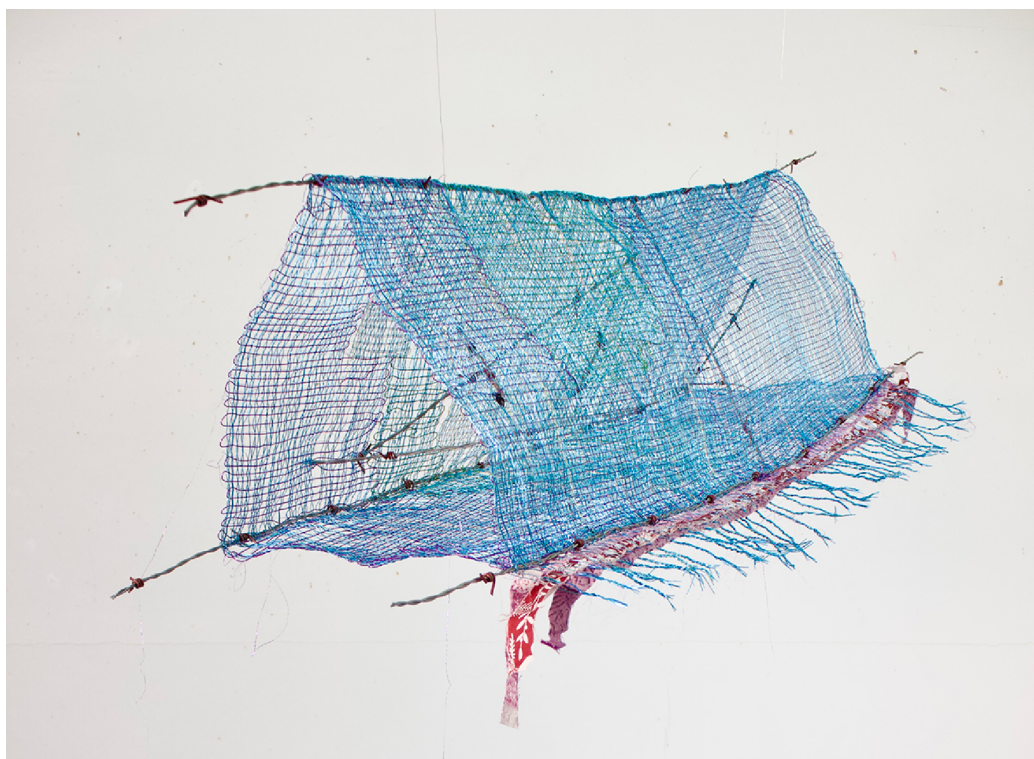


Consuelo Jimenez Underwood, "Peruvian Blues," 1993, woven, silkscreened tapestry, linen, and wire, 56 x 37 inches. Photo courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Art, San Antonio | New York City

Consuelo Jimenez Underwood was born in Sacramento, California, and is the daughter of migrant agricultural workers. Her mother was Chicana, and her father, Huichol Indigenous American; thus, the artist's layered identity is Chicana/Indigenous/American. The artist has long engaged with contemporary issues at the U.S.-Mexico border, including a recent stint at Artpace, as part of their Fall 2024 Artist-in-Residence cohort. Her work humanizes immigrants while also framing them within a multicultural lens, as seen in *Peruvian Blues*. In a 2011 interview with Mija Riedel, Jimenez Underwood recalls her fondness for Andean textiles stemming back to her time in graduate school, where she examined archives at Balboa Park and the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. She states, "The thing that amazed me the most about those guys, or those objects — the Peruvian textiles, burial shrouds — [was] the simplicity of the structure and the incredible density of some of them, of the borders."

Peruvian Blues features geometric arrangements, typical of Andean textiles. Starting at the top, butterflies appear side-by-side, standing above a label reading "CAUTION" that frames the upper register. For Jimenez Underwood, the caution sign is a signifier of larger cultural caution that Indigenous people must take. She recalls, "if you're Indigenous, you're always going to be under the scrutiny of the border patrol."

But the symbolism doesn't end there. Butterflies, dispersed throughout the artwork, represent fierce warriors — a fitting metaphor for the immigrants seeking a better life for their families. Moving down, the artist creates a grid pattern with the imagery of smaller caution labels, which frame a migrant family of border crossers across each rendition. Dispersed around the grid are the butterfly motifs found at the very top of the piece. And, at the bottom, a repeated circular image showcases designs drawn from Mexico (Aztec) and Maya calendars.



Consuelo Jimenez Underwood, "Galactic Penitentiary Blues," 2026, woven and assembled barbed wire and metallic thread, 51 x 11 x 11 inches. Photo courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Art, San Antonio | New York City

Across the gallery, Galactic Penitentiary Blues further reveals Jimenez Underwood's negotiation of borderlands realities in the 21st century. The piece is part of the artist's larger Galactic Detention Center series, which addresses the experiences of young people held in juvenile detention facilities and individuals detained in immigration centers. The term "illegal alien" has long been used to refer to undocumented immigrants. Jimenez Underwood responds to this language through a constellation-like map woven from steel and aluminum barbed wire and metallic thread. She manipulates these materials to create detention centers that either rest on podiums or float in midair, suspended by wires.

The work also highlights the absurdity embedded in the idea of an "illegal alien." How can a human being be an alien? And, by extension, how could outer space contain a detention center? Regarding her use of barbed wire in her work, Jimenez Underwood explains, "To this day, I still use barbed wire. The border's still here. Of course I'm going to use it." In Galactic Penitentiary Blues, that barbed wire extends beyond the terrestrial border, exposing the persistence and absurdity of systems built to separate and contain people.

Jennifer Ling Datchuk was born in Warren, Ohio, and raised in Brooklyn, New York. Her work investigates her layered identities as the child of a Chinese mother and her Caucasian father, of Russian and Irish descent. Datchuk's work reflects a third-culture perspective informed by both her Chinese and white identities. She works with porcelain, textiles, and hair, with the latter two often associated with traditional women's work. Her practice investigates material culture and craft, using both to raise questions about femininity, intersectionality, and personal history, influenced by the public and the private, as well as the personal and the political.



Jennifer Ling Datchuk, "Hustler" from the "Hustlers, my neck, my back series," 2023, porcelain, 12 x 9 x 4 inches. Photo courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Art, San Antonio | New York City



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In her Hustlers, My Neck, My Back Series, Datchuk presents four sculpted baby girls crawling on their hands and knees on a Lazy Susan, each rendered in porcelain. The babies carry assortments of objects, including peaches, chicken feet, miniature porcelain vessels, and service bells. Their small bodies and infantile features contrast with the objects they carry, creating a scene that is as charming as it is unsettling. Looking at these figures, I wondered, "How could these baby girls possibly carry all the peaches, chicken feet, and miniature porcelain vessels?" They are bound to drop something, if not everything that they carry.

Datchuk cast the babies from an antique Chinese export ware ceramic pillow, a form traditionally used to support the head during sleep and help preserve elaborate hairstyles. Datchuk explains, "I remade them to carry the weight of Asian women's labor our innocence is taken away from us so soon in life. The labor of caretaking and invisible labor starts at an early age. Their cuteness draws you in until you realize they are performing service work, a labor that provides comfort and care for others with almost no recognition." The weight these babies carry extends beyond the objects themselves. Cultural expectations are passed down through generations, shaped by traditions and values that can span centuries or, in this case, even millennia. I was particularly impressed by this series for the conversation it brings to women's roles as caretakers, which are often instilled from infancy.



Jennifer Ling Datchuk, "megaphone," from "like freckles, like eggshells, like stone (flesh)," 2022, Kohler Company porcelain, 11 1/2 x 6 x 5 1/2 inches

Datchuk continues her advocacy for amplifying women's voices through a personal lens with her porcelain megaphones in the series *like freckles, like eggshells, like stone (flesh)*. Her Chinese grandmother was a seamstress, while her Irish American grandmother worked on an automotive assembly line. By choosing the form of a megaphone, Datchuk moves beyond remembrance and instead demands recognition for the women whose labor has often been treated as invisible, asserting their place within broader narratives of American history. As Datchuk explains, her megaphones are "really to shout and tell their stories, about how women contributed to making America."

Together, Datchuk and Jimenez Underwood demonstrate how craft can function as a powerful form of cultural and political expression. Whether through porcelain, textiles, or barbed wire, both artists transform materials associated with labor and tradition into tools for examining identity, migration, memory, and belonging. In their hands, craft is not simply a means of making; it becomes a means of questioning the structures that shape our lives.

Jennifer Ling Datchuk and Consuelo Jimenez Underwood: *In Our Hands* is on view at Ruiz-Healy Art in San Antonio through November 7, 2026.